

## Pink Palace educator treks from the MidSouth to the South Pole

Elle Perry | Wednesday, September 24, 2014

Alex Eilers measures up to the seal near Scott Base, Antarctica



Alex Eilers, Manager of Education at the Pink Palace Museum, is preparing for her second research trip to Antarctica to study seals and she is inviting Memphis students to train and learn alongside her.

The distance from the [Pink Palace Museum](#) on Central Avenue in Memphis to McMurdo Station in Antarctica is 8,764 miles.

In November the museum's Manager of Education, Alex Eilers, will make that journey, joining

other K-12 teachers and researchers to study Weddell seals. She will spend six weeks on the ice.

“It takes a week to get down there and a week to get back,” Eilers said.

On her last trip, Eilers traveled from Memphis to Chicago to Los Angeles to Auckland, New Zealand, to Christchurch, New Zealand. After that she took an “ice flight” to her final destination.

“We got stuck in New Zealand last year for two days because of good weather,” she said. “It was too warm.”

Eilers was selected to participate in [PolarTREC](#) (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating). The goal of the program is to stimulate polar science education by bringing together educators and polar researchers in a field research project. Six of the teachers selected are sent to the Arctic; the other six are sent to the Antarctic.

“I was lucky enough to be selected, lucky enough to be selected to go to Antarctica,” she said.

This is Eilers’ second time being selected for a PolarTREC team in Antarctica. In 2012, she was on a research team that tagged also studied Weddell seals, although in a different capacity (tracking them using satellite tags). On this trip the team will be researching the timing of the seals’ molting and pupping.

During her 2012 Antarctica trip Eilers met the grandson of British polar explorer Robert Falcon Scott, 100 years after Scott’s fateful expedition to the South Pole.

About her previous trip, Eilers remarked, “Everything kept getting better and better and I’ve never had that happen before.”

Her return trip preparation includes things like getting in good physical shape and buying goods not likely to be found in the general store on the research station.

The largest part of preparation Eilers said is recruiting people to follow along on her journey.

People all the way from her hometown of Chillicothe, Ill. to here in Memphis are following along with Eilers via her journal, which she started in August. Journal updates are weekly before the expedition and daily after the expedition starts (depending on connectivity at the station). Through the journal Eilers will highlight Memphis schools and give challenges for students to complete. Readers of all ages can also ask Eilers questions about the trip.

The Pink Palace is also allowing people to follow along Eilers’ expedition in several interactive ways.

1. Through October, People can buy either a blank postcard at the museum or create their own 3.5 by 5 postcard and return it to the museum with their address filled out and .34 postage attached. The postcards will be mailed from Antarctica to the addresses listed on the postcards. Eilers noted that even though the journey the postcards will take is very lengthy, the postage rate

is the same because it will be mailed from a U.S. postal station in the Antarctic. Each postcard will be stamped with an “Antarctica” postmark. (In lieu of bringing the postcards to the museum, they can also be mailed to Alex Eilers, Pink Palace Museum, 3050 Central Ave., Memphis TN 38111.)

2. Students can also purchase a flag in the museum’s gift shop for \$10 that will fly in Antarctica. (Flags are to be returned to the museum after being decorated with an appropriate theme such as Weddell Seal fur and molting, seal pups, Antarctica weather conditions, or penguins). Flags will be returned to purchasers with a photo.

3. The museum has an Antarctica Scavenger Hunt in which students are to find pups and seals hidden in the Natural History and Cultural History exhibits.

4. Students can participate in the "Get Fit" Antarctica challenge. Participants complete a [virtual journey](#) to the McMurdo Station where they will earn virtual miles by completing science and exercise challenges.

Until her return to the ice, Eilers will spend a great deal of her time visiting local elementary and middle schools to get students excited about science. She is eager to relay information about her upcoming project because she believes that marine science is “something they can wrap their heads around.” In her presentations Eilers demonstrates equipment needed for the trip and life-size replicas of the seals she has worked with. Part of her instruction is teaching students about the scientific process and the power of a question.

Eilers recalled being interested in being an educator as early as the fourth grade.

She graduated from the University of Mississippi with a degree in elementary education and later followed with a graduate degree in educational psychology from the University of Memphis. While in graduate school she began a part time job as Planetarium Coordinator at the Pink Palace and has now been working at the museum for 10 years.

“I fell in love with informal education and ended up saying this is where I want to be,” she said.

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A native of Memphis, Elle Perry serves as coordinator of the Teen Appeal, the Scripps Howard city-wide high school newspaper program.